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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 001438

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: PANAMA COUNTRY CLEARANCE FOR HARRY PONTING AND ALEX YATES JULY 13-16, 2005

REF: SECSTATE 120695

1. Country Clearance is granted to Harry Ponting and Alex Yates, for travel to Panama during July 13-16, 2005.
2. Purpose of this visit is to assist Embassy implementation of the classified web publishing initiative known as Net-Centric Diplomacy (NCD).
3. As per reftel, hotel reservations and airport assistance is required. Hotel reservations will be made and details provided via e-mail. Embassy will provide meet and greet at airport.
4. Embassy point of contact will be Political Officer Karen Covert, telephones: office (507) 207-7122, residence (507) 225-2850, cell (507) 616-3723, fax (507) 207-7418, email:CovertKN@state.gov.
5. The American Embassy in Panama is located on Avenida Balboa and Streets 37 and 38, the Clayton Building is located on Demetrio Basilio Lakas Street (formerly Building 520, Clayton). (Note: When taking a taxi to the Embassy, please be sure to specify the exact address where you intend to go. If your business is in the Chancery, you should ask to be taken to the Avenida Balboa location. The Consular Section, FCS, MGT, PD, and CIS (formerly INS) are located on Demetrio Basilio Lakas Street, Clayton. Taxi drivers have sometimes taken our visitors to the Clayton Building when in fact they wanted to go to the Chancery. The Embassy telephone number is (Country Code (507) 207-7000 during duty hours. After duty hours, the telephone number is (507) 207-7200. End Note.)
6. Use taxis for transportation between the Embassy and the hotel unless other arrangements are made. Taxis in Panama do not use meters and fares should be agreed upon in advance.
7. U.S. currency is accepted in Panama and major credit cards are widely accepted. However, visitors are warned that large denominational bills (\$50 and larger) are often closely scrutinized or refused due to counterfeiting fears.
8. During the May-to-December rainy season, Panama City experiences heavy rain most days, often with brief flooding in the streets or walkways. During the rest of the year, rains are less frequent. The temperature is warm. Travelers are advised to pack accordingly.
9. All official USG travelers to Panama should enter on passports with appropriate diplomatic or official visas.
10. American visitors or TDYers departing from Tocumen International Airport must pay a 20 USD user fee. However, officials accredited to the American Embassy in Panama are exempt.
11. Security Assessment: There is no specific information to indicate that criminals or terrorists target official or private American travelers to Panama. Criminal statistics indicate a steady increase in drug use and related criminal activity to include robbery, assault, auto theft, larceny, and sexual assault. The emergence and establishment of youth gangs, in specific areas of Panama City and Colon, has been noted, yet has not reached the critical levels that it has in other countries in Latin America. Armed violence in the high crime areas of metropolitan Panama is not uncommon; a curfew enacted for juveniles remains in place. Police checkpoints have become commonplace on weekends in Panama City and Colon, checking for everything from drunken driving to valid drivers licenses, to searching for weapons. Based upon reported incidents, the high crime areas around Panama City are: Chorrillo, Ancon, Curundu, Rio Abajo, Veracruz Beach, Panama Viejo, and the Madden Dam overlook. In addition, U.S. citizens should exercise caution when visiting the campus of the University of Panama. Despite improved policing and more police officer visibility on the streets during business hours, urban crime continues to be a problem akin to what one would find in most mid-sized cities in the U.S. The border region of Panama and Colombia, the Darien, is unstable - and sometimes violent - due to narcotics trafficking and spillover from the Colombian civil conflict. The region is not developed and there is no ready access. All travel for official Americans to the area is restricted, and travel for pleasure is not allowed. Advice

to American travelers: Exercise good personal security practices and always be aware of your surrounding environment. Minimize the amount of cash, credit cards, jewelry, and other personal valuables you carry with you and avoid going out alone, particularly after dark. Choose restaurants and establishments that have adequate security. Radio taxis are safe and recommended. Contact the RSO to report any security-related incident. For updated security information, contact the U.S. Embassy's Consular Section.

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